"Rooftop", from page 1 …
themselves than just plain walking; they travel by serial prostration, several examples of which we observed. They prostrate themselves, pray, and then get up and endlessly repeat the process starting from the point reached by their outstretched hands. Thus the pilgrimage can consume years, and the pilgrims depend on their co-religionists for sustenance and shelter along the way. Once there, they circumambulate the sacred mountain or lake or shrine (again often by prostration). They bring back sacred rocks from the mountain, looked upon as good-luck charms, or in the case of a lake, water, which purportedly has healing properties. And they sometimes leave behind articles of clothing to indicate that they have broken with their past.

Mixed in with all these practices are elements of a primitive folk religion. Tibetans invoke local deities and spirits to exorcise demons, to heal the sick, to bring rain. Much as we observed in China, every stone or tree or body of water displays some sort of characteristic that bears on their lives.

Despite my efforts at understanding, I have been unable to connect Buddhist theory - intellectual and spiritual - with the practices we observed - visual and tactile. Possibly, the lamas and monks, through their study of the sutras and their self-denial, are attempting to reach enlightenment. It is also true that things like pilgrimage, offerings and prayer accrue "merit", which earns the believer a more favorable place in the reincarnation hierarchy. Who wants to come back as a worm? I posed my dilemma to a British friend who has lived in the region for many years and has converted to Buddhism. She replied that putting the religion into a framework of physical reality - to be able to see it and touch it - was necessary to reach the simple, isolated and unlettered ordinary people. While not satisfactory to me, maybe that's the answer?

Leaving Lhasa, we took to the road, the so-called "Friendship Highway" which crosses central Tibet and then turns south to end in Kathmandu. This route allows the Chinese to extend their presence ever farther into Nepal (soon to be engulfed?) and India. Mostly unpaved and often merely a track, it crosses several passes, the highest at 17,300 feet elevation, before roller-coasting down to Kathmandu at a mere 4300 feet. We traveled in four-wheel drive Toyota Land Cruisers, four of us plus a driver in each. Logistical support was provided by a truck carrying food, cooking and camping gear, manned by three helpers. The amazing skills of our drivers left us breathless; they made NASCAR drivers look like amateurs. Not to mention the trouble-free performance of the incredibly stressed vehicles. Along the way we visited two sacred lakes, whose deep blue provided a startling contrast to the pervasive brown color of the Tibetan landscape. To the consternation of the Tibetans, the Chinese are installing hydroelectric plants at their outlets.

After hours of following a bumpy and dusty track up and down and around the slag heaps which constitute Tibet's landscape, we arrived at Gyantse. Once a major trading town linking Lhasa with India, it has been bypassed as the focus has shifted eastward to China. Fortunately, as a result, it missed much of the mindless destruction of the Cultural Revolution, so its Buddhist treasures are more-or-less intact. Moreover, the Chinese "overlay" is minor so it retains its essentially Tibetan character. Except, of course, for the standardized Chinese hotel whose rooms and facilities are exactly the same as one encounters in Shanghai or elsewhere in China.

During the years of the Great Game, when the British watched anxiously as the Russian empire expanded into Central Asia - the great hinterland northwest of British India - influence, even control of Tibet became an objective of both imperial powers. In 1903-04, the British launched a military expedition from India to force Tibet into their camp. It was led by Colonel Francis Younghusband, a soldier-of-fortune and something of a rogue. Gyantse is surrounded by hills, on one of which stands a fort. Here the Tibetans, armed with swords and clubs against the British artillery, temporarily halted the advance. Younghusband eventually reached Lhasa, to discover that the Dalai Lama had fled. In spite of his hostile intentions, a deal was struck with the regent, and, curiously, Tibet became a friendly ally of the British until the Chinese takeover in 1950.

Today the fort is in ruins, but its ramparts provide an impressive overview of the surrounding country and especially of the old city, the Pelkor Chöde monastery, and the spectacular Kumbum stupa. The Kumbum, dating from 1427, stands some 115 feet high in several levels, crowned by a dome displaying the traditional sets of eyes looking in the four cardinal directions. The 77 chapels house beautiful Buddhist murals and statues. As one rises from level to level, one is symbolically ascending the path to enlightenment. Gyantse was certainly the most fascinating town we visited.

Here and there, the sere landscape is punctuated by a settlement built alongside a stream coming down from the mountains. Along with the fields of barley, the

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